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Good writing is discussed in terms of absolute literary values--"what is good writing" rather than "what is considered good writing." Major emphasis is focused on judging the quality of a literary work by its artistic merit instead of its political, social, or philosophical relevance. Examples of good and bad writing styles are cited throughout the article. (CW)

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The Case for Irrelevance

J. MITCHELL MORSE

IN THE CLASSROOM, I preach irrelevance. I once knew a professor of chemical engineering, a deeply religious man but a conscientious teacher, who regretted that he could find no way to promote Christian values through his courses. As a secular political liberal I share his sense of frustration; for as a teacher of literature I find that the best thing I can do for political liberalism in class is to ignore it.

This is not a paradox.

I am very much concerned with civil rights and the war in Vietnam; I believe that the enemies of reform are the friends of revolution; I believe that those on the right who refuse to permit the correction of intolerable conditions by democratic means are unwitting allies and dupes of those on the left who preach that they cannot be corrected by democratic means; I wish that good novelists, playwrights, and poets would address themselves to these problems; but alas, with a few brilliant exceptions such as Günter Grass, Peter Weiss, and Heinrich Böll, they leave that job to writers who have more heart than art; and as an English teacher I cannot with any conscience invite my students to read Kitsch as literature or literature as sociology. I will not tell them that *MacBird* is a great play. I will not tell them that *Another Country* is a great novel, or even a good one. I will not suggest that they read *Paradise Lost* as a political document. And I will not tell them that reading "Go, Lovely Rose" is a waste of time. Relevance be damned, I say. As a teacher of literature, I think it is vitally important for my students to develop some sensitivity to literary values; as an individual and I hope as a citizen, I fight, in class and out, against the calculated insensitivity of the all-out political mind. I fear that mind. Whatever side it's on, it's against me. It would tell me what to read and what not to read, what to enjoy and what not to enjoy, what to teach and what not to teach. It would have me rate Carl Sandburg above Wallace Stevens, and Arthur Koestler above Samuel Beckett.

J. Mitchell Morse, a Professor of English at Temple University, is the author of Matters of Style *(1968). He says of this article: "It was written before Chicago: B.C. I retract nothing."*

It is the enemy of nuance; and where nuances are suppressed I can't live.

I know, I know. I would not presume to tell a Negro product of white racism, unemployed and demoralized to the point of being unemployable, that he should be reasonable or have a sense of humor or an appreciation of nuances. He is not in a reasonable situation, much less an amusing one. As for nuances, I myself think it is fatuous to make fine distinctions between George Wallace and William Buckley, Jr. Teach George to say "Cui bono?" and "mutatis mutandis," and he too would be a right wing intellectual. But to lump me with them, merely because I am white, is to overlook essential differences, to say nothing of nuances; and to tell me that when I take the time to enjoy "Go, Lovely Rose" or "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" I am being immoral is to be an enemy of civilization. That demoralized Negro is an enemy of civilization because he can't afford not to be. He can no more live with nuances than I can live without them; they threaten him as much as lack of them threatens me. In this intellectual separatism there is no future for either of us. If he is driven to destroy what I stand for, he will not thereby liberate himself: for a society that cannot tolerate poems that have nothing to recommend them but beauty will not be led by people with decent instincts. And neither will my values be preserved if that Negro is destroyed or suppressed. A society that suppresses him will suppress me. The rednecked cop licensed to kill him is no friend of my civil, intellectual, or academic freedom, or my right to live; nor are the authorities in whose name he shoots. Between George Wallace and William Buckley, Jr., on the one hand, and Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael on the other, I see nothing to choose.

Our society's general unconcern with literary values has had unfortunate effects on the whole quality of its life, including its moral quality and ultimately its political quality. For years I have been distressed by the popularity of that cornball Ayn Rand among undergraduate students, and by their enthusiasm for her as a thinker. The process of disabusing them has to begin when they ask their first question, always the same, "Is Ayn Rand considered a good writer?" "Yes," I have learned to say. "By millions of people. Is that what you mean?" Some say, "No, I mean . . ." and stop, stuck. They can't even conceive the real question. Others, who can't conceive it either, say, "No. I mean, like, do *you* consider her a good writer?" The real question, "*Is* she a good writer?" doesn't occur to them. It surprises them. They don't believe in it. They believe in opinion, not in the possibility of true judgment; and they believe that the only difference between one man's opinion and another's is—well, like there's experts: like an English prof, for example, can tell better than like a business man. Can tell what better? Like whether the book is "considered good." I quote.

It is very hard to break this enchanted circle. It is very hard to induce a course of thinking that makes sense. But there are certain things we can do, and certain things we must not do. In terms of politics, *Strange Fruit* is as good as *A Passage to India;* for this reason, as well as for obvious tactical reasons, we must not argue about Ayn Rand's politics. All such arguments are beside the point. We must concentrate on her corny prose. And we must juxtapose it with examples of good prose. We don't absolutely have to start with a meditation by John Donne. There are more accessible examples all around us, including many that are not associated with the scare word "literature." There are even familiar jokes that will serve our purpose. Even bad jokes. For some bad jokes are good: that's why we enjoy them. The tactless question King Arthur

asked Queen Guenevere, "Who was that last knight I seen you with, lady?" is a good bad joke. We call it low, we loudly profess not to enjoy it, but we do enjoy it. Good bad jokes, good good jokes, good nursery rhymes, good novels, and good translations of poetry and literary prose—as we shall see—are all good for the same reason: they give us literary pleasure. With regard to literature, pleasure and judgment are inseparable: if the work gives us pleasure, we call it good; if it doesn't, or if we wish it didn't (and this is a complication I'll explain away in a few minutes), we call it incompetent or cheap or low or pretentious or meretricious.

Every judgment is an estimate of effectiveness: a good scientific theory is one that works, a good highway surface is one that stands up to the traffic and the changes of weather, a good paint is one that lasts and keeps its appearance, and a good work of art is one that gives us pleasure. This last item seems to be affected by a degree of subjectivity that doesn't affect the others; but it isn't. For with regard to a work of art we must distinguish the pleasure it gives us through its own qualities from the other pleasures it may suggest. Every aesthetic judgment involves such a distinction.

Any representation or suggestion of sexuality, for example, be it a painting, a statue, a piece of music, a dance, a film, or a poem, will give us intimations, however faint, of erotic pleasure; but if it is well made, each will give us in addition an aesthetic pleasure peculiar to itself, which it does not share with the others: graphic pleasure, plastic pleasure, musical pleasure, choreographic pleasure, cinematic pleasure, literary pleasure.

Literary pleasure has to do with words: it is the pleasure that a skillful performance with words affords us, whether or not we consciously observe it. When we do consciously observe it we are likely to enjoy it more, because our consciousness of what is going on doesn't inhibit or replace our unconscious emotional response but supplements it and may even serve to arouse it. I didn't respond emotionally to Marvell's

> Annihilating all that's made
> To a green thought in a green shade

until I understood it intellectually—several years after I first read it: only then, having begun to read Plato, did I suddenly see what Marvell was doing, and the joy of a complex and subtle perfection flooded my eyes. All our educationists notwithstanding, intellectual perception does not deaden emotional response; often the emotional response depends absolutely on the intellectual perception. Accordingly, an unintended perception is liable to produce an unintended response. If a lyric offers nothing for our intellect to perceive but the fact that it is making a cliché appeal to our tears, we will respond not with tears but with a smile of amusement or a sigh of boredom or a moment of resentment at the effort to take us in. The possibility that the effort was made unconsciously, with all naive good will, is not likely to increase our respect for the hack who made it. He is afflicted with what Plato called the lie in the soul.

The intensity of our pleasure in a literary performance depends on the degree of skill it manifests and on our ability to perceive skill. These are two different things: each may operate independently of the other, and each may exceed the other. We call jokes "low," for example, when the degree of skill is so slight that we are ashamed to be so easily pleased: the joke is facile, the pleasure is low-grade. In the following illustrative story, our ability to perceive the verbal cleverness is so far in excess of the cleverness itself that we feel ruefully that we have been had:

> Once upon a time there were two little skunks named In and Out. One

> day In went out and didn't come in, so their mommy said to Out, "Out, go out and bring In in." So out went Out, and after a while, sure enough, he brought in In. Do you know how he found him? In stinked.

In this case, when I say that we have been had I don't mean that we have been abused, as has the person who gives a merely sentimental response to a cliché lyric. I mean that our response, however slight, was more than such a weak performance deserved. Nevertheless, we do respond: we respond with pleasure, not to the ostensible content, but to the arrangement of words. Change the names of the skunks, or change "stinked" to "stunk," and though the plot remains unchanged the story ceases to have any interest. Our interest, our pleasure, however low, is purely literary.

The opposite case, in which the skill of the performance gives us pleasure even though we may have no ability to perceive skill, is illustrated by the nursery rhyme

> One misty moisty morning,
> When cloudy was the weather,
> I chanced to meet an old man
> Clothed all in leather.
>
> He began to compliment
> And I began to grin:
> "How do you do?" and
> "How do you do?"
> And "How do you do?" agin.

Like many of the Mother Goose rhymes, this one is pure poetry. Little children love it long before they learn to read, long before they know the meaning of the word "compliment," long before they become clearly conscious of the alliterations, assonances, consonances and repetitions that make it good. They respond with physiological pleasure to these products of physiological play in the author —who also, as we know, need not have been clearly conscious of what was going on inside himself. Or herself. Like the poets whom Socrates interviewed, he or she may very well have been less able to account for the quality of the poem than any of us academic bystanders.

Another kind of literary pleasure comes of solving verbal puzzles or seeing them solved: that is, of joining the author in a word game. The familiar palindromes Joyce puts in the mouth of Lenehan in *Ulysses*—"Madam, I'm Adam" and "Able was I ere I saw Elba" —and the various games he plays in *Finnegans Wake*—such portmanteaus as "Puffedly offal" and "that farced epistol to the hibruws," the imitative form of "bi tso fbrok engl a ssan dspl itch ina," the colorful image of Jarl von Hoother charging out of his castle "like a rudd yellan gruebleen orangeman in his violet indigonation," and the linguistic miming of Mutt and Jute—

> Scuse us, chorley guy! You tollerday donsk? N. You tolkatiff scowegian? Nn. You spigotty anglease? Nnn. You phonio Saxo? Nnnn. Clear all so! 'Tis a Jute. Let us swop hats and excheck a few strong verbs weak oach eather yapyazzard abast the blooty creeks....

—these and other such puzzles have in each case a formal integrity that is content enough, and to which we respond with pleasure. But a trick is after all a source of rather low-grade pleasure: the pleasure of not having been tricked or of seeing belatedly how the trick worked. This is true even when the trick is more subtle, as when Beckett says in *Watt* that the busy Mr. Spiro could cite many theologians "because he was a man of leisure"—i.e., a scholar, the word *scholar* being a derivative of the Greek *scholé*, leisure, and our pleasure in the sentence depending absolutely on our knowledge of this fact. Sometimes Beckett's tricks are subtler still, as when he says on page 202 of the Grove Press edition of *Murphy* that Wylie sought Murphy as a means of marrying Miss Counihan be-

cause (among other attractions) "she had private means," and on page 213 makes Wylie say to the other self-seeking seekers, "Our medians, or whatever the hell they are, meet in Murphy." But this kind of thing, though much more sophisticated than the bad joke about King Arthur and Queen Guenevere, gives us essentially the same simple kind of pleasure—tainted, moreover, with the emulation that seems to be an inescapable aspect of puzzle-solving: a non-aesthetic pleasure.

Pure, non-emulative and intense or high literary pleasure comes of observing a performance that exercises without baffling our ability to perceive literary skill, and in which—as in a handsome wrought iron gate with a design of vine leaves and tendrils—form and content so perfectly express each other that the form seems natural, the content artful, and both inevitable. What Joyce and Beckett afford us is essentially this pleasure, to which all their tricks are only incidental. Joyce's description in *Ulysses* of the priest rising from the water owes its quality to the exact rightness—the literary justice—of every word, not to any trick:

> An elderly man shot up near the spur of rock a blowing red face. He scrambled up by the stones, water glistening on his pate and on its garland of grey hair, water rilling over his chest and paunch and spilling jets out of his black sagging loincloth.

If the word "scrambled," for example, were changed to "clambered" or "climbed" or "crawled" or "struggled" or "pulled himself" or any other near equivalent, the content would be changed, the moving image would be less vivid and would not suggest as it does just what it does. An ordinary writer might have said, "An oldish man emerged from the water near a spur-like rock, red-faced and puffing. He clambered up over the stones, wet from head to foot." A somewhat better writer might have added, "with [*sic*, fatally *sic*] water gleaming on his bald head encircled with grey hair, running down over his pot-bellied body, and pouring copiously out of his sagging, black loincloth." The ostensible content—the intended content, the priest himself—is the same in this passage as in Joyce's; but the actual content—the representation of the priest—is of much poorer quality and gives us a much poorer pleasure. Joyce's representation shows the priest alive; the other makes him—if you'll pardon my saying this of a priest—only a lay figure. Joyce's superiority lies in his more accurate choice of words: "blowing," "glistening," "pate," "rilling," "spilling," "chest and paunch," "from"; in his repetition of "water," and in the greater speed and more appropriate emphasis of "black sagging" without a comma.

Beckett's language is equally just, and usually more formal. He is a descendant of the great medieval stylists, who embodied in the rhetorical devices of classic decorum a most unclassic vehemence of feeling; but he goes far beyond them in the strictness of his rules, for to the difficulty of conveying private feeling through the syntactic gestures of public ceremony he adds the difficulty of refusing to use what Joyce called "big words": such words as "love," "grief," "despair," "alas," etc., which the medieval stylists used with a freedom that amounted to abandon and debauchery. Except for purposes of humor, when he often uses rare and even exotic words, Beckett restricts himself to the vocabulary of simple concreteness. The following three paragraphs, from a passage telling us how Watt passed the evenings in his room, constitute a perfect poem, with a beginning, a middle and an end, whose classic balance and pragmatic vocabulary convey a lyric intensity of feeling that hotter and smokier words and a more romantic syntax might perhaps parody but could surely not match:

> At ten the steps came clearer, clearer, fainter, fainter, on the stairs, on the landing, on the stairs again, and through the open door the light, from darkness slowly brightening, to darkness slowly darkening, the steps of Arthur, the light of poor Arthur, little by little mounting to his rest, at his habitual hour.
>
> At eleven the room darkened, the moon having climbed behind a tree. But the tree being small, and the moon's ascension rapid, this transit was brief, and this obscuration.
>
> As by the steps, the light, growing, dying, Watt knew that it was ten, so he knew, when the room darkened, that it was eleven, or thereabouts.

The purely literary beauty of this passage is clear to anyone who has any acquaintance at all with the classic mode or any intuitive sensitivity to form; but to say that it moves us by its form alone would be false. We are also moved by the loneliness of Watt and Arthur, which though not mentioned is made unmistakably evident through the imagery, the rhythm, and the vocabulary that don't mention it. So that our pleasure in the passage is a complex of three elements: (1) an intellectual appreciation of its form, (2) an emotional appreciation of its unstated content as well as of the physiological play that underlies it, and (3) a secondary intellectual appreciation of the skill with which the content is suggested and our feelings are touched.

The second element, though nonliterary insofar as it concerns the content, is not sentimental. It is a real emotion, honestly evoked; for honesty in literature requires indirection. A direct appeal to our sentimentality is liable to be meretricious; if it lacks validity of form, it will inevitably be meretricious. Consider, for example, these verses by Bayard Taylor:

> From the Desert I come to thee
> On a stallion shod with fire;
> And the winds are left behind
> In the speed of my desire.
> Under thy window I stand
> And the midnight hears my cry:
> I love thee! I love but thee!
> With a love that shall not die
> *Till the sun grows cold,*
> *And the stars are old,*
> *And the leaves of the Judgment*
> *Book unfold!*

Why did Taylor capitalize "Desert"? For the same reason that he italicized the last three verses: in order to make the corn grow taller. He was proud of effects he should have been ashamed of. Homer's heroes pursued each other with winged feet, addressed each other with winged words, and shot each other with winged arrows: "The winged arrow smote him in the throat, and his limbs were all unstrung, and he groveled in the dust." The metaphor is not always so clearly visual, but it always makes a legitimate analogy. But what is the meaning of "shod with fire"? I make an effort to see that stallion's feet, and what I see doesn't make sense. How speedy is desire? To outstrip one wind of any speed worth talking about would be quite a feat in itself, but to outstrip them all without riding in all directions takes genius. If the stars are not old by this time, when will they be? And why intimate that such love will die just when eternity is about to begin? Shakespeare, promising his beloved that he/she would live in memory for the duration of the English language, was both more modest and more confident.

Bayard Taylor was a respectable citizen who surely had no intention of making a meretricious appeal; he was not a writer of schlock books; but these verses have the appeal of a torch singer in a Grade F night club or a prostitute under a street lamp luring the farm boys; and now that I'm quoting Carl Sandburg let me say that his poem about Chicago makes the same kind of appeal. Certainly Sandburg's idiom is superior to Taylor's, but it too is a thing of hot and smoky words—"Stormy, husky, brawling"—and

nonsensical abstractions—"Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on job"—plus Chamber-of-Commerce bombast: "Freight Handler to the Nation." What makes this last phrase ridiculous is the disparity of form and content. The British tradesmen's formula, "By appointment to H.M. the Queen," retains an earlier use of "to" that expressed a relationship not only private but personal, as when Congreve designated Mrs. Fainall as "Daughter to Lady Wishfort, and Wife to Fainall, formerly Friend to Mirabell." The tradesmen's formula suggests, however faintly, that the tradesmen know the Queen personally. That is vulgar enough. The phrase "to the Nation" diffuses the relationship and makes it unblushingly commercial, which is doubtless an improvement in moral terms; but in literary terms it is a disaster, and the implication that the freight is handled not by a freight agency but by a city—or by a big stormy man who throws it around—doesn't make much sense any way you look at it. The line is vulgar because it is false. That is to say, it is vulgar because of its content.

For style is partly a matter of content. Consider the statement with which the narrator of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* introduces himself: "My name is Serenus Zeitblom, Ph.D." On the first reading, its style seems to be due entirely to its content: without the initials "Ph.D." at the end, it would have no style at all; with them, it becomes delightful. Why does it delight us? Because it gives us a signal to which we respond: it engages our imagination, and thereby—by means of the inferences we supply—reveals at once the pedantry of the narrator, the humor of the author, the detachment of author from narrator, and the equivocal tone and intention of the whole novel. By assuming that we can respond to the signal and supply all these things that are not explicitly given, it compliments our intelligence.

But such engagement would not be possible without the particular form of the content. If the narrator should introduce himself by saying, "My name is Serenus Zeitblom; I have a Ph.D.," the signal would be different, and weaker and inferior; it would not so deftly compliment our intelligence; the wit of Thomas Mann's formulation inheres in its form. The form, however, depends on the content—the precise content, the very words that Thomas Mann uses. For if the narrator should say, "I am Serenus Zeitblom, Ph.D.," his statement would lack the humor of the misstatement, "My name is Ph.D." It would also fail to reveal two other things it now reveals: the tension between Zeitblom's unconsciousness of his fatuity and Mann's consciousness of it, and the dramatic situation in which Mann stands between narrator and reader, manipulating one, glancing toward the other in expectation of understanding and good will. Thus, by his clever management of one sentence, Mann immediately identifies Dr. Zeitblom as a brother to Sancho Panza and Joyce's Shaun.

A good translation, I said, is good because of its literary qualities. I have quoted from H. T. Lowe-Porter's translation of *Doktor Faustus,* which in this sentence is literal and puts the words as nearly in the same order as the difference of the two languages will permit, the original being, "Mein Name ist Dr. Phil. Serenus Zeitblom." But since the idiomatic pattern of one language coincides only here and there with that of another, few sentences can be translated literally and even fewer word-for-word in the same order. Usually, as in this case, translating idiomatic German into idiomatic English requires a change of word order, if of nothing else; and when we change the word order we ask the reader to breathe differently. This shifts the emphases throughout the sentence. Serenus Zeitblom's next sentence, for example, reads thus in Mrs. Lowe-Porter's

translation: "I deplore the extraordinary delay in introducing myself, but the literary nature of my material has prevented me from coming to the point until now." A literal translation would read, "I myself deplore the strange postponement of this card-giving, but, as it has chanced and been ordained, the literary process of my communications would me until this moment ever not thereto come let." I don't think anyone would deny that Mrs. Lowe-Porter's version is better: she is a rather rare translator in that she knows her native language as well as the foreign one. The patterns of thought in different languages being so different, even the most literal translation, if it is not to be a parody, involves a restatement, a rearrangement, of the author's thought. Thus even an accurate carrying over of the ostensible content of simple prose can hardly preserve the tone and tune of the original; and it is notoriously all but impossible to preserve the tone and tune of poetry in translation.

The syntax of our thought necessarily depends on that of our language; and so do its manners, its bearing, step and demeanor. Can you imagine a French verse translation of *Paradise Lost* that would be anything at all like *Paradise Lost*? It would most probably have to be in rhyme, since the French custom of counting the silent *e*'s reduces the auditory interest of French verse to such an extent that without rhyme there would be very little indeed. Boileau's arguments in favor of rhyme (1674) seem to be a direct reply to Milton's arguments against it (1667), though they may very well not be; and if they are not, so much the better for my present thesis. On the one hand, Boileau didn't read English, and *Paradise Lost* wasn't translated into French until 1836; on the other hand, anyone who kept up with the literary news and gossip so assiduously as Boileau did was certainly aware of *Paradise Lost*; moreover, some of his remarks on how not to write an epic seem to be aimed at Milton as well as at Desmarets and Scudéri. But whatever the case may be, and although Milton was of course right for his own poem, Boileau was right for French verse. So that it doesn't matter whether he was replying to Milton or not. For that 1836 translation—by Chateaubriand, no less—is in prose. In his preface Chateaubriand says it is only a kind of pony to help the reader read the great original, which he prints on the facing pages: "a literal translation . . . which a child as well as a poet can follow with the text, line for line, word for word, like a dictionary open before his eyes." He knows enough about the art of poetry, he says, not to presume to try for "une traduction *élégante*" (his italics). *Paradise Lost* in elegant French verse would be lost indeed. Consider, by way of illustration, the loss of Milton's sonnet on the Waldenses as translated by Valery Larbaud:

> Venge, ô Seigneur, tes Saints égorgés,
> dont les os . . . .

The words are lexically accurate, but that waltzy rhythm is unjust both to Milton and to the Waldenses, who one would think had suffered enough.

Of course not all verse translations of poetry are bad—not even all rhymed translations. One of Housman's few good poems is his translation of "Nous n'irons plus ~~pas~~ au bois"; Chaucer's translation of *Le Roman de la Rose* is at least as good as the original; and Milton's unrhymed lyric "What slender youth bedewed with liquid odours," translated from Horace, is worthy of Milton. But such achievements are extremely rare; more often, a good poet faced with a good poem in another language makes little or no effort to follow it faithfully: Yeats's "When you are old and grey and full of sleep" is not a translation but an original poem suggested by Ronsard's "Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir à la chandelle," which was itself an original poem sug-

gested by Tibullus' passage beginning "At tu casta maneas," so that there is no similarity at all between Yeats's poem and the corresponding part of Tibullus'.

As a rule, poetry translated by non-poets becomes non-poetry. It doesn't become prose. As far as literary value is concerned, it becomes nothing: for it has none. We may, to be sure, read it as something other than literature: as a source of wisdom, perhaps, so that we can write an essay on Man in the Cosmos or The Individual and Society or Fate and Free Will: the same essay we wrote after reading *Oedipus Rex*, and again after reading *Job*, and again after reading *Hamlet*, and again, God spare us all, after reading *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. How we miseducate the youth! Or we may read it as a social datum or a bit of historical or biographical evidence or an anthropological potsherd. As anything, in fact, but literature. The same thing happens to prose when it is translated by a non-stylist or an anti-stylist. Nobody reads Constance Garnett's translation of *The Brothers Karamazov* as a novel. We all read it as philosophy or morality or religion, or as a Picture of Russian Life in the Nineteenth Century. We may, to be sure, have intended and in all good faith started out to read it as a novel, but when we talk about it we always talk about its moral or religious or psychological or political or social or historical implications, never about its literary qualities: because in Constance Garnett's language it has none. Likewise, we read Herter Norton's almost inconceivably bad English version of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* not as a masterpiece of literary art but as an existentialist document and a source of Sartre's *Nausea* and Weiss's *Exile*. On the other hand, even those of us who don't subscribe to Saint Augustine's beliefs can enjoy the Pusey translation of the *Confessions* as literature; and I find John Florio's unfaithful version of Montaigne better reading than Donald Frame's faithful one. In a sense, Florio was more faithful than Frame: for Montaigne was not a great thinker like Norman Vincent Peale to whom we go for wisdom but a highly readable writer to whom we go for pleasure. We enjoy his conversation. We also enjoy Florio's personal reports of it. I don't mean to imply that Frame is not excellent, but only that he is not so hair-raisingly wonderful as Florio. Compare these two versions of two consecutive sentences from the first essay, the first version by Frame, the second by Florio:

> Edward, prince of Wales, the one who governed our Guienne so long (a person whose traits and fortune have in them many notable elements of greatness), having suffered much harm from the Limousins, and taking their city by force, could not be halted by the cries of the people and by the women and children abandoned to the butchery, who implored his mercy and threw themselves at his feet—until, going farther and farther into the city, he saw three French gentlemen who with incredible boldness were holding out alone against the assault of his victorious army. Consideration and respect for such remarkable valor first took the edge off his anger, and he began with these three men to show mercy to all the inhabitants of the city.

> *Edward* the black Prince of *Wales* (who so long governed our Country of *Guienne*, a man whose conditions and fortune were accompanied with many notable parts of worth and magnanimitie) having beene grievously offended by the *Limousins*, though he by maine force took and entred their Citie, could by no meanes be appeased, nor by the wailefull out-cries of all sorts of people (as of men, women, and children) be moved to any pitty, they prostrating themselves to the common slaughter, crying for mercy, and humbly submitting themselves at his feet, untill such time as in triumphant manner passing thorow their Citie, he perceived three French Gentlemen, who alone,

> with an incredible and undaunted boldnesse, gainstood the enraged violence, and made head against the furie of his victorious armie. The consideration and respect of so notable a vertue, did first abate the dint of his wrath, and from those three began to relent, and shew mercy to all the other inhabitants of the said towne.

The difference between "the cries of the people" and "the wailefull out-cries of all sorts of people" is the difference between mere accuracy and literary genius. What I am saying is that a translation can be a work of literary art; and that the peculiar pleasure we take in a work of literary art depends on its quality as a work of literary art and on our sensitivity to such quality. As C. S. Lewis has observed, people who enjoy commonplace or inferior writing enjoy it for other than literary reasons, and they are able to enjoy it only because they are not sensitive to literary quality. Kenneth Roberts fans enjoy Kenneth Roberts because they enjoy looking for a northwest passage and fighting Indians; but we who enjoy Samuel Beckett enjoy his language.

Does this mean that language is everything? Not quite. If language were everything, such constructions as "I zigged when I shoulda zagged" and "I boogied when I shoulda woogied," which do in fact give us a purely literary pleasure, would be better than the sentence "In the beginning was the Word." The high quality of this sentence is due not to its design but to the fact that it expresses perfectly an idea which, whether we accept it or not, engages our intellect. We may engage with the idea only in order to refute it, but it is a subtle and difficult idea, and the perfect expression of it in that syntactically simple sentence gives us a thrill of pleasure. If we try to put it into the language of those who were educated by disciples of John Dewey we can see how the quality of its substance depends on the quality of its form: "Like first off there was ...you know... there was like this idea." Long's you know what I mean, what differnt's make? The difference is the difference between intellectual elegance and intellectual nose-picking: between a clear mind and a mind too slack to formulate one clear sentence in its native language. But of course that second sentence is a factitious fake. I didn't hear it, I made it up. It would never occur in nature: people who think in that idiom don't and can't have such thoughts. A subtle idea can be artificially translated into muddled language, but it could never come from a muddled mind. Fakery of this kind is the basic weakness of many efforts to popularize difficult ideas, to promote desirable points of view, and to express ideas that should be taken seriously through fiction that cannot be taken seriously.

Here, in the matter of literary judgment, we see the necessity of distinguishing between the pleasures of art and the other pleasures that art may suggest—including the pleasures of social anger and political engagement. For many novels, stories, plays and poems that one would think could not be taken seriously by anybody who knows anything about the art are in fact taken seriously by many people—critics, reviewers, teachers—who professionally profess to know quite a bit about it. They do know quite a bit about it; and nevertheless they take pleasure in books to take pleasure in which is to be deluded. They are not insensitive to literary values; often they have demonstrated a fine appreciation of nuances in works of the past; but in their belief that literature should speak to the problems of our time they tend to judge current fiction, drama and even poetry by other than literary standards. When they enter the present age they look for "relevance" above all: social relevance, political relevance, ethical relevance: and when they find it their enthusiasm often leads them to mis-

take it for literary relevance. For the time being they forget that a work of art is good to the extent that it is relevant to itself, and that it need not necessarily be relevant to anything else at all.

In extreme cases they regard the literature of their own time in essentially the same way that a nutritionist or a health nut regards food: he doesn't care how it tastes as long as it's good for you—in fact, he suspects that if it tastes good it's bad for you: he lives on wheat germ, whey, and iron filings, disapproves of anything that has to be cooked, and shrinks in moral disdain and physical horror from plum pudding. Many literary critics comport themselves toward the pleasures of contemporary literature with an equally aggressive moral rectitude. They have no use for "fine writing." They find Nabokov "precious" and Beckett "irrelevant." In their anti-dictatorial zeal—a zeal I share, let me remind you—they prefer *Darkness at Noon* and *1984* to *Pnin* and *How It Is*. These latter two, they will tell you, Take a Pessimistic View of Human Nature and Offer No Solutions to the Great Problems of Our Times. They will not say it of the former two. They regard with approval and even with perverse pleasure all kinds of commonplace or sub-commonplace novels that attack racism or militarism or the TV industry or bigoted rural school boards, or that Dramatize the Need for Family Planning, or Reveal the Universal Pathos of the Human Condition in a Fascinating Byway of Medieval History, or Cast a Penetrating Light into Some of the Dark Corners of the Human Soul, or Blow the Lid Off the Dope Racket, or show how picturesque —i.e., good—is life in the dirt-road country of the northeast or southwest or northwest or southeast.

About such people not much can be done. The best course is to stay out of their way, and if possible keep our children out of their way, and observe three simple rules:

1. Read some verses of Thomas Campion every morning immediately on rising, and every evening immediately before retiring, to clear the blood.

2. Listen to a good record of Handel's *Acis and Galatea* once a week.

3. Faced with a new book, look at it, smell it, weigh it in your hand. If it doesn't look, smell and feel right, don't open it. If you open it, read the first paragraph aloud. If the rhythms are not pleasing, read no further. You won't be wrong.